

DPH Encourages Delawareans to Take Rabies Prevention Seriously After Death of Kent County Woman

DOVER – The Delaware Division of Public Health (DPH), and Department of Agriculture (DDA) are asking residents to increase efforts to prevent exposure to rabies after the death of a Kent County woman from the disease. The woman, who lived west of Felton, is the second Delawarean to contract, and subsequently pass away from, the disease. The first was a young boy from Newport, who passed away in 1941 after being bitten by a stray dog.

Rabies is an infectious disease affecting the nervous system of humans and other mammals. Infection can occur through the bite or scratch of an infected animal, or if saliva from such an animal gets into the eyes, nose, mouth or an opening in the skin. It is transmitted from animals to humans or from animals to other animals. There have been no reported cases of human-to-human transmission other than through organ transplantation.

“Our hearts go out to this woman’s family during this very difficult time,” said DPH Director Dr. Karyl Rattay. “Because rabies is a fatal disease once symptoms develop, we urge all Delawareans to ensure they are taking steps to avoid exposure. This is a largely preventable disease.” Important preventive measures include vaccinating your pets (dogs, cats and ferrets over the age of 6 months as required by state law); consulting with your private veterinarian regarding vaccination of livestock and horses; avoiding touching unfamiliar animals, even if they appear friendly; and being on the lookout for potentially rabid animals (foxes, cats, dogs, bats, raccoons,

etc.).

DPH and DDA are working closely with Pennsylvania health officials and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the investigation. The woman was admitted to a Delaware hospital in late July after becoming ill. Her condition quickly deteriorated, and she was transferred to a Pennsylvania hospital for further treatment and testing. She passed away last week. Test results did not confirm the presence of rabies until recently. The source of the disease has not been identified.

Though the risk of human-to-human transmission is extremely low, the health care facilities that provided care to the patient are conducting risk assessments with staff to identify anyone who may have had direct exposure to infectious materials and coordinating with state health officials. DPH is also conducting assessments with anyone else who may have had direct contact with the patient up to two weeks before she became ill.

It is imperative to report animal bites and scratches immediately to state health officials so that preventive treatment can be initiated. If the animal is unavailable to be quarantined or tested, DPH recommends that people receive post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), a series of four vaccinations, as a precautionary measure.

Anyone who has been bitten, scratched by, or come in close contact with, a stray, wild or unfamiliar animal, should immediately contact their health care provider or call the DPH Rabies Program at 302-744-4995 (during business hours) or 1-888-295-5156 (outside of business hours). An epidemiologist is available 24/7.

If your animals have been bitten or scratched by another animal, or have come into contact with their saliva or remains in the last two months, please contact the Department of

Agriculture at 302-698-4630 or rabies.hotline@delaware.gov.

Rabies is almost completely preventable. DPH recommends that members of the public take the following important steps to stay clear of exposure:

- All dogs, cats, and ferrets 6 months of age and older are required by Delaware law to be vaccinated against rabies by a licensed veterinarian. Consider vaccinating livestock and horses as well. It is recommended to consult with your private veterinarian if you have any questions regarding whether your animal(s) should be vaccinated against rabies.
- Reduce the possibility of your pets being exposed to rabies by not letting them roam free.
- Spaying or neutering your pet may reduce the tendency to roam or fight and, thus, reduce the chance they will be exposed to rabies.
- Do not keep your pet's food or water outdoors; bowls can attract wild and stray animals.
- Keep your garbage securely covered.
- Do not touch or otherwise handle wild or unfamiliar animals, including cats and dogs, even if they appear friendly.
- Wild animals, particularly raccoons and bats, are the highest risk of exposure to rabies. Do not handle or go near wild animals even if they appear approachable.

Since Jan. 1, 2018, the Division of Public Health (DPH) has performed rabies tests on 83 animals, nine of which were confirmed to be rabid, including three foxes, three raccoons, one cat, one dog and one horse. Rabies tests performed on two animals (one sheep and one dog) were indeterminate. DPH only announces those rabies cases for which it is possible the animal had unknown contacts with humans and there is a risk of exposure to the community.

For more information on the DPH rabies program, visit <http://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/dpc/rabies.html> or call 1-866-972-9705 or 302-744-4995. For more information on rabies, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>.

A person who is deaf, hard-of-hearing, deaf-blind or speech-disabled can call the DPH phone number above by using TTY services. Dial 7-1-1 or 800-232-5460 to type your conversation to a relay operator, who reads your conversation to a hearing person at DPH. The relay operator types the hearing person's spoken words back to the TTY user. To learn more about TTY availability in Delaware, visit <http://delawarerelay.com>.

Delaware Health and Social Services is committed to improving the quality of the lives of Delaware's citizens by promoting health and well-being, fostering self-sufficiency, and protecting vulnerable populations. DPH, a division of DHSS, urges Delawareans to make healthier choices with the 5-2-1 Almost None campaign: eat 5 or more fruits and vegetables each day, have no more than 2 hours of recreational screen time each day (includes TV, computer, gaming), get 1 or more hours of physical activity each day, and drink almost no sugary beverages.